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The Way to Iowa

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The Way to Iowa

June first, 1833, saw the restraints to settlement in the Iowa country removed. A year earlier the treaty of the Black Hawk Purchase had been signed, by which the United States secured from the Indians the cession of a strip of land approximately fifty miles wide extending along the western bank of the Mississippi River from the northern boundary of Missouri to the southern boundary of the Neutral Ground. In the meantime the Indians had withdrawn to their new homes and the soldiers who had patrolled the region near the "Mines of Spain" had marched back to Fort Crawford. Then the white invasion began. True, a few bold adventurers had crossed the river at Dubuque to mine lead before this date, but they were trespassers in the eyes of the government, and they had been repeatedly driven out.

In 1832, George H. Catlin, artist and historian, had foreseen the oncoming rush of settlers, and

after a visit to the Des Moines River Valley had written in prophetic vein:

The steady march of our growing population to this vast garden spot will surely come in surging columns and spread farms, houses, orchards, towns and cities over all these remote wild prairies. Half a century hence the sun is sure to shine upon countless villages, silvered spires and domes, denoting the march of intellect, and wealth's refinements, in this beautiful and far off solitude of the West.

Four years later the first census of Wisconsin Territory gave the two Iowa counties a population of 10,531. Two years later, in 1838, a census taken in May, showed a total of 22,859 inhabitants west of the river. The population had doubled. In two years more, 43,000 people had settled in the Iowa country. Between 1840 and 1850, 150,000 moved to Iowa and the next decade saw a tide of immigrants that "was to sweep over the waste places of the State and to inundate the valleys and hills with more than sufficient human energy to build up a Commonwealth of the first rank".

What allurements drew this flood of people from their far off homes in Ohio, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania or the nearer regions of Indiana, Missouri, and Illinois? At an earlier date her supply of furs had lured the hardy frontiersman and trapper to the Iowa land. Then her veins of lead, with the promise of quick wealth in the hills and bluffs about Dubuque, drew their quota of adventurers. But the fame

of Iowa's bountiful land constituted the principal attraction for the pioneer. Speculators flocked to land offices hoping to enter claims and to re-sell at a profit; mechanics expecting to ply their trade joined the throng; and homeseekers planning to obtain fertile acres at a low price made the migratory movement an annually increasing one. There came glowing reports of bountiful crops. News that game was plentiful and that the rivers swarmed with fish was sent back in letters to the old home and, published perhaps in the village paper, furnished to friends and relatives the impetus to make the journey.

The first immigrants to Iowa could come in one of three ways: by boat over the available water routes, by wagon over roads and trails and in part over trackless country, or by a combination of the two. As the railroads crawled westward they came to be used more and more by the newcomers, but even to the end of the migratory period the Lake route, the Ohio-Mississippi waterway, and the overland trails provided a way of transit to many of the movers.

Let us follow the fortunes of two families, one from New York, the other from Pennsylvania, setting out for Iowa by the water route in 1840. One has come to Buffalo by the Erie Canal, passing through Utica, Rochester, and Lockport. Here father, mother, and the children embark on the steamboat "Constellation" bound from Buffalo to Chicago. On one corner of the deck they pile their

few possessions. Soon the corner is a promiscuous heap of chairs, pots, kettles, and bedding. Nearby, an emigrant family from central Europe is sitting on a pile of strange-looking farm implements and large chests. They are on their way to Wisconsin. A party of English gentlemen from Canada on their way to a hunting expedition in the West comes on board. Tourists for pleasure, and speculators going out to inspect land they have bought but have not seen, swell the passenger list.

The boat gets under way. It hugs the shore, gliding swiftly along past low green wooded banks and hills on one side, by the wind-tossed waves of Lake Erie on the other, to Dunkirk, forty-five miles from Buffalo. To Erie next, thence on past Conneaut, Ashtabula, and Fairport to Cleveland, the boat plows its way — about one hundred and ninety miles in a day and a half. Here the travellers to Iowa disembark to take the Ohio canal to Portsmouth.

Let us turn our attention now to the Pennsylvania farmer who has decided to go West. He holds a sale, then hires a neighbor to take him and his family with a few household goods to Pittsburgh. They engage passage on the steamboat "Monsoon" bound for St. Louis. They go on board and pile their belongings at the end of the lowest deck near the bow. Both ends of this deck are piled high with freight and the possessions of those who can not afford to pay the cabin fare.

Father and mother settle down to rest and await the start, but the twelve year old son begins an investigation of the boat. He ascends a stairway to the deck above and finds a narrow piazza from which doors enter the cabins. At the rear of this deck he locates the ladies' cabin with staterooms grouped around it, in the center he finds the dining-room surrounded by the cabins for gentlemen, forward he discovers the barroom with space in front where the men can smoke and chat. He climbs another stairway to the hurricane deck, above which rise the twin smokestacks and the hissing steampipe. Descending to the middle deck he notices a sign containing the rules of the boat. Among them, four read somewhat as follows:

No gentleman shall go to table without his coat.

No gentleman must pencil-work or otherwise injure the furniture.

No gentleman shall lie down on a berth with his boots on.

No gentleman shall enter the ladies saloon without permission from them.

He goes below to rejoin the family and to enjoy the confusion of sights and sounds as the boat prepares to get under way. Drays rattle over the wharf, discordant cries of the workmen loading a late consignment of freight mingle with the river songs of the negro boatmen. The hoarse puffing and panting of the high-pressure engine adds to the general din. Finally the boatmen loose the moorings,

the steamer slowly wheels around to start downstream on its twelve hundred mile journey.

The first stop is made at Wheeling, ninety-five miles distant, to load and unload freight. Here, immigrants from Maryland and Virginia, westward bound, come on board. Thence the steamer follows the winding channel of the river past tiny islands, between shores lined with fields of grain, with alternating hills and gloomy woods to Marietta, eighty-three miles below Wheeling. Then on past the villages of Belpré and Gallipolis, stopping perhaps at one or the other to replenish the wood supply for the firebox, the "Monsoon" comes to Portsmouth on the Ohio shore. Here our New York immigrant and his family whom we left at Cleveland embark for St. Louis.

On to Cincinnati, to Madison, and to Louisville the boat steadily makes its way. Here it enters a canal to avoid the rapids, returning to the waters of the Ohio at the small town of Shipping Port. It leaves Fredonia, Rockport, Evansville, Golconda, and Paducah in its wake. Halts at these towns to leave or take on freight, or to purchase cordwood at the woodyards, allow the passengers to take a stroll and the immigrants to renew their supply of food.

The boat plows on. Far removed from the heat of the fires and boilers, from the chatter of the deck passengers or the jar of the engines a group of travellers sit for hours on the upper deck watching the rush of steam from the pipe above their heads and

the passing panorama of bluffs and hills, of prairies and of groves of beech, walnut, oak, and maple. A returning steamer, the "Ione", comes in view. The bells of both boats ring out in salutation. Cairo appears in the distance, and the boat, leaving the glassy waters of the Ohio, turns its prow upstream on the turbid bosom of the Mississippi.

Up the long irregular sweeps of this river to Cape Girardeau, Chester, and St. Genevieve the journey continues. Herculaneum with its high shot tower and Jefferson Barracks on its limestone bluff are reached and passed. St. Louis comes into view.

Here our Iowa-bound travellers take passage on a smaller boat for the north. A month has passed since they set out from Buffalo and Pittsburgh. They move upstream past long stretches of prairie land; they reach Iowa, they stop at the landing at Burlington. A motley crowd disembarks — our two farmer families and others eager to push on to a new home, mechanics with their tools and personal effects expecting to find steady employment, the trader with goods for the frontier trade, the speculator with his money, and the visitor who will return to write about the new land.

Turn now to the journey of the overland pioneer. Although many used the water routes to Iowa, travel by wagon predominated. Of this migration, John B. Newhall, Iowa's early press agent, has left a clear picture.

The "flood-gates" of emigration were now opened, and scarcely had the "Red Man" set his footsteps in the order of march, toward the "setting sun", ere the settler began to cross the Mississippi with his flocks and herds, to make a "new home" on the fertile plains of Iowa. . . . The writer of these pages, frequently having occasion to traverse the great thoroughfares of Illinois and Indiana, in the years of 1836-7, the roads were literally lined with the long blue wagons of the emigrant slowly wending their way over the broad prairies—the cattle and hogs, men and dogs, and frequently women and children, forming the rear of the van—often ten, twenty, and thirty wagons in company. Ask them, when and where you would, their destination was the "Black Hawk Purchase".

Imagine the start of the journey. An Ohio farmer sells his farm and stock. He builds a frame on the wagon box and covers the bows with canvas to protect the inmates from the sun and rain. He loads in a few household goods. His horses are hitched, or the oxen yoked. Sad farewells to friends are made. The family is stowed away inside, the cow is tied behind. He mounts to the driver's seat, cracks his whip and the wagon rolls down the road. High are the hopes of the group as they start: visions of a new home and big crops cheer them on their way.

At sunset a halt for the night is made by the road-weary travellers. Newhall has left a picture of such a stop.

I well remember, one beautiful autumnal evening in 1836, crossing the "Military Tract" in Illinois. The last

rays of the sun was gilding the tree tops and shedding its mellow tints upon the fleecy clouds, as my horse turned the short angle of a neighboring "thicket", I encountered a settler "camped" for the night. . . . The "old lady" had just built her "camp fire" and was busily engaged in frying prairie chickens, which the unerring rifle of her boy had brought to the ground; one of the girls was milking a brindle cow, and that tall girl yonder, with swarthy arms and yellow sun-bonnet, is nailing the coffee mill on the side of a scrub oak which the little boy had "blazed" with his hatchet. There sat the old man on a log, quietly shaving himself by a six-penny looking-glass, which he had tacked to a neighboring tree. And yonder old decrepit man, sitting on a low rush bottomed chair, is the aged grandsire of all; better that his bones be left by the way-side than that he be left behind among strangers. He sits quietly smoking his pipe with all the serenity of a patriarch — apparently as ready to shuffle off this "mortal coil" that very night, as to sit down to his prairie chicken supper.

They go to bed as soon as it grows dark. Early in the morning they are up and on their way again. Slowly they move on day by day, week by week. They join others bound the same way. They travel together. At times heavy rains make the road bottomless and the wheels mire down till broken traces halt the caravan. Wagons are unloaded and all help in extricating them. Sometimes a stop is made overnight at a tavern along the way. Ohio and Indiana have been left behind, the canvas-topped wagons roll across Illinois. They reach Rock Island and across

the river the travellers see a gateway to the land of their dreams.

They gather into a large encampment, each family awaiting its turn to be ferried over in the order of arrival at the camp. Our Ohio farmer is next. He drives his oxen on board the flat-boat, a huge barge-like affair propelled and steered by long sweeps. The current carries barge and all downstream and it must be towed back to the landing on the Iowa side. He drives on shore. He has reached Iowa.

Thus they came, the pioneers, to the land of their vision. They crossed the river at the points where cities grew up on the Iowa shore, at Dubuque, Davenport, Muscatine, Burlington, and Keokuk. The man-propelled flat-boat gave way to the horse ferry, and it, in turn, to the ferry propelled by steam, and each was taxed to capacity by the oncoming horde. The way to Iowa was open.

BRUCE E. MAHAN